

THE SYNTHETIC CENTURY

Collage from Cubism to Postmodernism

The twentieth century was a period of tremendous social consciousness in the visual arts—of incessant referencings of contemporary life by artists working in all media. While modernist critics attempted to see art in its purity, at some remove from society, artists themselves continued to quote mass cultural phenomena in their work. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the remarkably rich, and varied, collage and *papier collé*¹ creations that have been produced throughout the past ninety years. Invented in 1912, during the intense collaborative explorations of Cubism by Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso, the media of *papier collé* and collage have incorporated actual objects from the real world (bits of newspaper stories, ticket stubs, cancelled stamps, scraps of fabric or plastic, etc.) on a two-dimensional surface. Artists working in these media have used the collage element to vastly different ends, from the literal to the metaphorical, including: as a straight representation of itself; as a formalist or abstract demarcation of an area of flat color (or pattern, texture, shape); or even to convey a metaphor or pun. Such direct citation of the world has been revolutionary for the visual arts. As Donald Kuspit remarked, “Collage destroys the effectiveness of the idea... that art’s highest achievement is not simply to create an illusion of life, but to function as a kind of representation of it. Life can be directly referenced—directly incorporated into art... Collage also destroys the idea that life is a stable whole.”²

Much has been written about the profound effect of the Industrial Revolution, of mass-production, on the visual arts in the nineteenth century, and its growing significance in the twentieth. For the Cubists, the infiltration into society at large of such a broad range of new media and materials ultimately led to the *physical* infiltration of such materials into their work in the forms of *papier collé* and collage. Several art historians, including

Thomas Crow, Christine Poggi, Rosalind Krauss, and Robert Rosenblum, have closely investigated this phenomenon of how “low,” mass-produced commodities such as newspaper and wallpaper found their way into canvases and drawings by Picasso and Braque to ultimately challenge the very nature of what was considered “fine” art. “The many machine-made materials and artifacts that turn up in Cubist collages establish a parallel between... previously distinct cultural codes. The resulting works do not celebrate the machine or the popular commodity so much as redefine originality.”³ Would collage have had the same impact on the art of the twentieth century if Picasso and Braque had glued bits of old manuscript pages onto their works? Or if Picasso had limited his palette to traditional oil paints and not allowed himself to experiment with such recently developed media as Ripolin enamel?⁴

While such examinations of the incorporation of mass-manufactured materials into collage have been significant and enlightening, they have concentrated largely on Cubist, Futurist, and Dada works and specifically on the media available to artists before 1925. Yet it is important to note that the license the Cubists gave themselves to integrate into their vocabularies such unsanctioned materials gave subsequent generations of artists license to adopt an ever-increasing variety of nontraditional media and methods. It was the very nature of this collision of such disparate materials in Cubist collage—the coexistence of new, often commercially produced materials and more traditional, fine art materials—that informed the new medium and helped to facilitate its monumental impact on all Western art produced since 1912. Ultimately, this has spurred generations of artists to segue into new realms of artistic expression, and to continue to push the boundaries of what art is and can be.

1 In her introduction to *Collage: Critical Views* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), 5, editor Katherine Hoffman gave a succinct description of the terms *coller* and collage: “The French word *collage*, from the verb, *coller*, means ‘pasting, sticking, or gluing’ onto a surface, for example, the application of wallpaper. (In slang, the word *collage* means an illicit love affair, which may have delighted Picasso and Braque. The past participle *collé* refers to something fake or pretend in slang.) *Papier collé* is a somewhat narrower form of collage referring only to the use of paper, and often referring to the paper collages of the Cubists. Picasso is usually credited with the beginnings of the use of collage by modern artists, while Braque is usually credited with the innovation of *papier collé* or pasted paper in modern art.”

2 Donald S. Kuspit, “Collage: The Organizing Principle of Art in the Age of the Relativity of Art,” in *Relativism in the Arts*, ed. Betty Jean Craige (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1983), 142.

3 Christine Poggi, *In Defiance of Painting: Cubism, Futurism, and the Invention of Collage* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), viii.

4 Enamel paint was one of these early industrial coatings. Based on a varnish-and-oil mixture rather than on straight oil as a medium, it was developed as an exterior coating for its great resiliency to heat, moisture, and light. One of these early gloss enamels, Ripolin, was

Collage is appealing largely because of its accessibility. Through its inclusion of recognizable, real-life elements, collage offers a natural entrée into what is often a quite abstract composition. Though highly complex and often enigmatic, collage provides even the individual most unfamiliar with modern art a tangible, identifiable element from the real world—a way to get beyond the abstraction and toward a deeper understanding of the work as a whole. Decontextualized from its original function, a collage element also presents the viewer with a new way in which to perceive the world. In a collage “[t]he artistic fragments refine the life fragments, giving them appeal to a more contemplative level of consciousness than is customary in everyday life, making them safely formal and aesthetically significant. ‘Laundered,’ the life fragments have... a ‘crispness’ they did not have in life.”⁵ And this points to the other strongly appealing quality of collage: it is, typically, a less sober art form. There is a strong element of freedom in collage, a tendency to experiment more, to pun—qualities that are often missing in work by the same artist in another medium. As Robert Motherwell once commented: “I do feel more joyful with collage, less austere. A form of play. Which painting, in general, is not, for me, at least.”⁶

It is almost a cliché now, at the turn of the twenty-first century, to remark that the invention of collage⁷ has had a greater and more profound effect on twentieth-century art than any other development. After all, collage is now so broad a term as to include under its rubric the assemblage, found object, and even certain film and video. By limiting this exhibition to a selection of paper-based collages, the aim is to focus more intently on the materials that form these works as two-dimensional creations, and hence on the concepts that *inform* them as cultural objects. (The paints, drawing materials, fabrics, papers, plastics, etc., referred to throughout this essay are discussed in further detail in the catalogue’s appendix on media and materials.) This essay is not meant to offer a comprehensive his-

torical overview of collage or of the various artists and movements that have embraced the medium.⁸ Rather, using examples from the Yale University Art Gallery’s rich collection, it intends to offer a general look at the ever-expanding vocabulary of materials and media used by artists working in collage that have served not only to express individual artistic intent or to reflect the time in which a collage was made, but also to define the medium throughout its ninety-year history.

From the September day in 1912 when Georges Braque purchased and later included in his charcoal drawing on fine artist’s paper three pieces of *faux bois* (imitation woodgrain) paper to create the first *papier collé*,⁹ the medium of collage has been one in which traditional “high art” materials have commingled with cheaper, mass-produced consumer products, the ephemeral detritus of modern life. Just a few months before, in the spring of 1912, Pablo Picasso had glued to an oval canvas a piece of oilcloth with simulated chair-caning pattern and affixed to the outer edge a loop of heavy rope to create the first true collage.¹⁰ In these playful explorations, neither Braque nor Picasso intended to “invent” a new medium.¹¹ Rather, they incorporated prefabricated materials into their Cubist compositions as short-hand substitutes for drawn or painted objects which, when pasted onto a picture surface, challenged the picture’s illusory power as well as the traditional separation of representation and reality. What is more, by using such non-traditional, real-life objects, Braque, Picasso, and subsequent artists working in collage challenged what they felt to be antiquated, nineteenth-century distinctions between fine or “high” art and amateur or “low” art. In so doing, they broadened the palette of materials available to twentieth-century artists and ultimately widened the parameters and definitions of art.

a favorite of Pablo Picasso. In several letters of 1912 Picasso mentions his preference for Ripolin, indicating his appreciation of its saturated, opaque color and smooth finish. In one letter Picasso speaks of his “Ripolin paintings, or *Ripolin* genre, which are the best ones” (Pablo Picasso, letter to Émile Henry Kahnweiler, 20 June 1912, *Complete Louise et Michèle Leiris Collection Kahnweiler-Leiris*, Centre Georges Pompidou, 22 November 1984–28 January 1985, 169, quoted in Jo Crook and Tom Learner, *The Impact of Modern Paints* (London: Tate Gallery, 2000), 18, 1).

5 Kuspid, 124.

6 Robert Motherwell, in *An Exhibition of the Work of Robert Motherwell* (Northampton, MA: Smith College Museum of Art, January 1963), 6.

7 For clarity and simplification, this essay adopts “collage” as an umbrella term for *papier collé* and collage on paper.

8 For a comprehensive overview of the history of collage, see Herta and Paul Amirian Collection, *Collage*, trans. Robert E. Wolf (Cologne: Verlag M. DuMont Schauberg, 1968; New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1968).

9 Georges Braque, *Fruit-dish and Glass*, September 1912, pasted papers and charcoal on paper, Private collection.

10 Pablo Picasso, *Still Life with Chair-Caning*, spring 1912, oil and oilcloth on canvas, with rope frame, Collection Musée Picasso, Paris.

This is not to say that Braque included *faux bois* wallpaper in his still life because it was a commercially produced material or because it reminded him of his "low" art roots as the son of a housepainter. Rather, it is to point out that, for Braque and Picasso, such concerns about what was or was not a suitable fine art material were irrelevant. What was at issue was how to continue to create representational (non-abstract) works while producing ever more complex fragmentations of three-dimensional reality on a two-dimensional surface. What was also at issue for the Cubists was how to reintroduce color into their monochrome compositions without investing color with the connotative or emotional import it had for the Impressionist, Neo-Impressionist, and Symbolist artists who preceded them.

In the mid- to late nineteenth century such artists as Edouard Manet, Georges Seurat, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec relished the depiction of "low" culture (life in the café or brothel) in their canvases and prints. Yet it was not until the advent of Cubism in the twentieth century and specifically the advent of collage that the oozing of the low, the ordinary, the everyday into fine or "high" art became a tangible, *physical*, and henceforth inseparable part of two-dimensional artistic production. As Thomas Crow has noted, "The principle of collage construction itself collapses the distinction between high and low by transforming the totalizing creative practice of traditional painting into a fragmented consumption of already existing manufactured images."¹² For the Cubists, as Christine Poggi has aptly observed, the very medium of collage undermined the process by which works of art themselves inevitably become commodities in the modern world. "Indeed, many of the formal and material properties of Cubist collages and constructions seemed designed specifically to elude the apparently inevitable process of commodification. Many collages and constructions, for example, were structurally fragile, made of bits of paper pasted or pinned to a paper support, the drawing executed in friable, unvarnished charcoal."¹³

The Italian Futurist artists, working at the same time as the Cubists, enthusiastically embraced the new medium, finding in it a way to give physical form to the speed, dynamism, force, simultaneity, and motion of the machine age. In an article published in a June 1914 issue of the Italian journal *Lacerba*, Carlo Carrà advocated the use of any material in a work of art as long as it was true to the artist's vision: "If an individual possesses a pictorial sense, whatever he creates guided by this sense will always lie within the domain of painting. Wood, paper, cloth, leather, glass, string, oil-cloth, majolica, tin and all metals, colors, glue, etc., etc., will enter as most legitimate materials in our present artistic constructions... Thus, if all categories become modified and destroyed, categories which were completely arbitrary in any case, and which made of art an *artificial game perpetrated with colors and canvas*, for art this will be an advantage, for it will be liberated from every prejudice and will manifest itself in its greatest sincerity and purity."¹⁴

Certainly, many artists who have embraced the collage medium over the past ninety years have shared Carrà's desire to free artistic production from any material rules. In their attempt to break away from the past—from its antiquated styles as much as from its narrow vocabulary of sanctioned materials—these artists have endeavored to create work that resonates with the avant-garde present, both stylistically and physically, through an incorporation of new media and materials. In 1923 Kurt Schwitters, a premier collage artist associated with the Dada and Constructivist movements in Weimar Germany, claimed: "Every means is right when it serves its end... What the material signified before its use in the work of art is a matter of indifference so long as it is properly evaluated and given artistic meaning in the work of art. And so I began to construct pictures out of materials I happened to have at hand, such as streetcar tickets, cloakroom checks, bits of wood, wire, twine, bent wheels, tissue paper, tin cans, chips of glass, etc. These things are inserted into the picture either as they are or

11 For an excellent description of the interactions between Picasso and Braque that led to the inventions of collage and *papiers collés*, see William Rubin, *Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1989).

12 Thomas Crow, "Modernism and Mass Culture," in *Modernism and Modernity: The Vancouver Conference Papers*, ed. Benjamin H. O. Buchloh, Serge Guilbaut, and David Sookin (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1981), 246.

13 Poggi, *In Defence of Painting*, 162.

14 "Vita moderna e arte popolare," *Lacerba* (1 June 1914), repr. in Carlo Carrà, *Tutti gli scritti*, 38, as quoted in Poggi, 165–66.

else modified in accordance with what the picture requires."¹⁵ And in 1946, the Abstract Expressionist artist Robert Motherwell, another devotee to the medium of collage, stated: "The sensation of physically operating in the world is very strong in the medium of the *papier collé* or collage, in which various kinds of paper are pasted to the canvas. One cuts and chooses and shifts and pastes, and sometimes tears off and begins again... What an inspiration the medium is! Colors on the palette or mixed in jars on the floor, *assorted papers*, or a canvas of a certain concrete space—no matter what, the painting mind is put into motion, probing, finding, completing."¹⁶

More than any other medium, collage has, throughout the twentieth century, united artists with otherwise widely varying aesthetic intents. Their embrace of the medium—of its inherent freedom, of its nonhierarchical inclusion of a wide range of materials—speaks to the fact that collage has served as a shared conduit through which artists have striven to come to terms with an increasingly materialized, consumer-based society: with the rapidity, the disposability, the abundance of the twentieth century.

Artistic Investigations: The Integration of New Materials in Twentieth-Century Collage

Georges Braque's *Still Life with Violin* of 1912 and *Black and White Collage* of 1913 (cat. nos. 1, 2) are among the strongest examples of early Cubist *papier collé*. In these works, charcoal, graphite, and fine laid papers intermingle with *faux bois* wallpaper and cheap, brown wove papers to form intriguing mixtures of traditional and nontraditional media. Though quite different, each is constructed of no more than four pasted elements and only one or two drawing media, and thus is representative of Braque's pared-down *papier collé* vocabulary—a quality practically unrivalled in collage of the twentieth century until Robert Motherwell.

Through its optical inversion of drawn and pasted elements, *Black and White Collage* (plate 1) cleverly addresses Synthetic Cubism's concern with the manipulation of illusion and reality. At the right of the composition, what at first appears to be a piece of white paper (representing a sheet of music) *adhered onto* a black ground (representing a guitar or other stringed instrument), is in reality a form drawn directly on the fine white laid (Ingres) *papier collé* support. The collaged element is actually the sheet of painted *black paper*, notched out to create the illusion of the white paper overlay. By strictly limiting his palette to black and white papers and black and white chalks, Braque exploited this positive/negative, figure/ground reversal to confound the viewer's expectations about the depicted versus the actual. Foreground and background are further confused by the artist's use of chalk overdrawing: his continuation of drawn forms from the black onto the white ground through a simple switch from white to black chalk. In this *papier collé*, the flatness of the picture plane prevails: everything and yet nothing is on the surface—all elements appear to hover just above or just beneath. It was such manipulations of artifice and reality that caused many to mistakenly describe Braque's *papiers collés* as *trompe l'oeils*, and led Braque to object emphatically in 1917: "The *papiers collés*, the imitation wood—and other elements of the same nature—which I have used in certain drawings, also make their effect through the simplicity of the facts, and it is this that has led people to confuse them with *trompe-l'oeil*, of which they are precisely the opposite. They too are simple facts, but *created by the mind* and such that they are one of the justifications of a new figuration in space."¹⁷ Composed of two colors (black and white), two media (black chalk and white chalk), and two types of paper (painted black wove paper on a white laid paper support), Braque's *papier collé* is remarkably complex despite its disarmingly simple palette.

15 Kurt Schwitters, *Merz 1. Holland Dada* (Hanover, January 1923), quoted and trans. in Werner Schmalenbach, *Kurt Schwitters* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1967), 94.

16 Robert Motherwell, "Beyond the Aesthetic," *Design* (1946), quoted in E. A. Carmean, Jr., *The Collages of Robert Motherwell: A Retrospective Exhibition* (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts, 1972), 91.

17 Georges Braque, "Thoughts on Painting," *Word-Stud*, Paris (December 1917), trans. in Edward F. Fry, *Cubism* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1966), 147–48.